

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104421](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Broadband is critical to modern life. Despite federal efforts, broadband access on tribal lands has traditionally lagged behind the rest of the country.

GAO was asked to review federal efforts for improving broadband on tribal lands. This report examines: (1) the extent to which federal funding programs have supported the deployment of broadband infrastructure on tribal lands; (2) barriers tribes and providers face in accessing federally funded programs to serve tribal lands; and (3) the extent to which federal agencies focus on tribal issues related to broadband access.

GAO analyzed federal government data on broadband funding for tribal lands; interviewed selected tribes, broadband providers, tribal organizations, and other local officials about challenges to obtaining and using federal broadband funding; and interviewed officials from the Federal Communications Commission and other federal agencies about their broadband programs and coordination.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations: (1) that the Executive Office of the President should specifically address tribal needs within a national broadband strategy and (2) that the Department of Commerce create a framework within the American Broadband Initiative for addressing tribal issues. The Executive Office of the President did not agree or disagree with our recommendation, but highlighted the importance of tribal engagement in developing a strategy. Commerce agreed in part with our recommendation.

View [GAO-22-104421](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or vonaha@gao.gov

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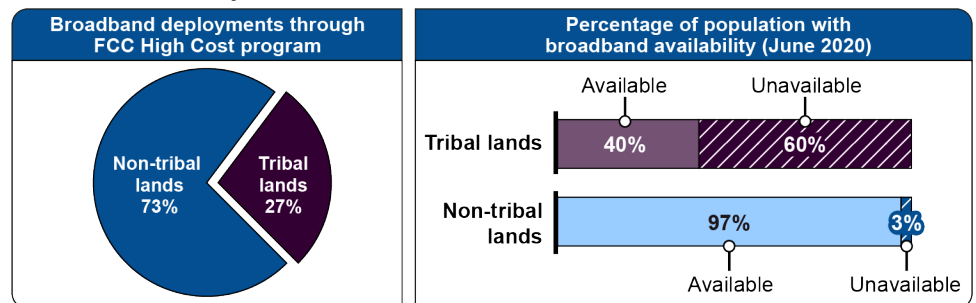
TRIBAL BROADBAND

National Strategy and Coordination Framework Needed to Increase Access

What GAO Found

Federal funding from 2015–2020 has increased broadband access for people living on tribal lands, but access continues to lag behind the rest of the country. Nationwide, conservative estimates show more than 18 percent of people living on tribal lands remain unserved by broadband as of 2020, compared to about 4 percent of people in non-tribal areas. For example, in Arizona federal programs have increased broadband access on tribal lands, but that access continues to lag far behind the rest of the state (see figure).

Broadband Availability in Arizona



Sources: GAO analysis of Universal Service Administrative Company's High Cost: Connect America Fund Broadband Map data, 2015-2020, and FCC 477 data as of June 2020. | [GAO-22-104421](#)

Note: Broadband availability includes speeds of 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload or greater, excluding satellite service. We have previously reported that FCC's data overstates access to broadband, particularly on tribal lands.

Persistent barriers limit tribes' and providers' ability and interest in participating in federal broadband programs, including fragmentation of federal programs and difficult application requirements. Tribes and providers continue to face challenges identifying programs to suit their needs from the landscape of numerous, but fragmented, federal broadband programs. Furthermore, complex application processes and the need for upfront funds create additional barriers and discourage participation.

The Executive Office of the President took the lead on coordinating federal tribal broadband efforts in 2021, but these efforts are not guided by a national strategy with clear roles, goals, and performance measures. Officials from agencies that implement broadband programs told us that a national strategy led by the Executive Office of the President could improve coordination and the persistent gap in access on tribal lands warrants specific focus. In addition, the primary ongoing broadband coordination body, the American Broadband Initiative (ABI), lacks a framework for addressing tribal barriers that could also support implementing a national strategy. While ABI has formal frameworks that focus on federal funding and permitting in general, ABI members said they do not hold regular discussions about tribal issues. In 2020, the Department of the Interior also identified a need for increased focus within ABI on tribal issues. The Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) is a leader within ABI, and NTIA officials said they intend to use ABI to meet NTIA's statutory requirements related to broadband coordination. Without a national strategy and a framework within ABI to focus tribal efforts, broadband access for people living on tribal lands will continue to lag behind the rest of the country, perpetuating the digital divide.